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UNCLAS LUANDA 001291

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TAGS: PGOV PREL AO
SUBJECT: Over 800,000 voters successfully registered after only one month in Angola

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Over 800,000 voters successfully registered during the first month-long phase of the registration campaign in Angola. The opening round of registration was hailed a success by both government and opposition leaders despite a few technical glitches. In response to civil society concerns, the government is also developing the system to accredit civil society observers for registration despite the fact the law does not allow for this. To date, the GRA is demonstrating its commitment to a transparent process, and all eyes will be on the next phase of registration, beginning January 15, to see if the government continues to respond to concerns raised by the opposition and civil society. END SUMMARY

Angolans "thirsty" to register

¶2. (SBU) The first phase of voter registration concluded on December 15th, registering over 800,000 potential voters in the first month. This falls shy of the goal of 1 million registrations, but observers consider the shortfall the result of technical glitches rather than lack of voter interest. Turnout was above expectations in Luanda, Benguela, and Huambo, where brigades registered an average of 250 people per day. Over 189,000 potential voters were registered in Luanda alone. Opposition supervisors, or "fiscais" stated that the registration process was `going well' and that voters were "thirsty" to register.

¶3. (SBU) Lines were long but orderly at the country's 285 registration stations during the final days of the first phase. Glitches in the technology-heavy registration system continued to slow the process, but efficiency improved dramatically as system familiarity increased. Average time to process a registration fell from 20 minutes to 8 minutes. Printer problems are now the major source of processing delays, and broken printers have been known to shut registration stations altogether. The theft of computer systems in Cabinda and Cuando Cubango presented another obstacle for registration officials.

¶4. (SBU) Misinformation and lack of information also continued to affect the registration process. Last-minute crowds formed as word spread that the registration process was closing altogether, rather than just for a month. The government launched an information campaign though television, radio and newspapers to assure citizens that they will have more time to register, and to clarify documentary requirements and appropriate selection of witnesses. Voter registration is mandatory for all citizens over age 18, and accurate information on the distribution of voters is critical for election officials to create logistical plans for both national and local elections.

Opposition and NGOs have praise in general, but...
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¶5. (SBU) Opposition leaders hailed the registration process and stated that the brigades were well organized and efficient. Opposition parties exercised their legal right to observe the registration process in all registration stations. There were no reports of violence during the first phase, but opposition leaders pointed to irregularities which need to be corrected in phase two. UNITA expressed serious concern over reports that people from provinces bordering the DRC and Zambia, especially people with limited Portuguese language skill, had difficulty convincing brigade agents of their Angolan citizenship despite having the required documentary proof or witness testimony. At the same time, there were also reports of DRC and Zambian citizens trying to register as Angolans to allow them to stay in the country. The Partido Socialista Angolano (PSA) posted reports of brigade agents collecting 500 kwanzas (6 dollars) to expedite registrations in Cazenga, Luanda province. A few opposition leaders opined that the registration process is going slowly because without a firm election date the electorate is not motivated. A recent nation-wide poll by IRI, however, shows 79 percent of the electorate plans to vote in the elections and almost 60 percent believe that the elections will be very important to them (septel).

¶6. (SBU) Electoral NGOs represented by Rede Eleitoral and Plataforma Eleitoral expressed continuing concern over irregularities in the process of observer accreditation. (NOTE: The electoral law only allows established political parties to observe the registration process, not NGO's. END NOTE). Civil society groups also protested that the government failed to give ample advance notification of the registration plan in general, and the accreditation requirements and process in particular. The situation was further confused when some Provincial Election Commissions (CEP) accredited observers, while CEPs in other provinces refused to do so. Both the Interministerial Commission for the Electoral Process (CIPE) and the National Electoral Commission (CNE) were criticized for not acting fast enough to provide firm guidance to the provinces on this

matter.

¶7. (SBU) The government countered that it was working to create a system to allow for civil society groups to observe the registration process, even though the electoral law did not foresee this. The government has, however, been working with NGOs to accredit observers and allow for civil society observation. As of 06 December, 44 municipalities in 15 of 18 provinces had accredited observers. The Government has also allowed foreign missions and NGO's (IRI and NDI, for example) to observe the registration process.

¶8. (SBU) Personnel and accreditation costs put financial pressure on opposition parties and NGOs. The Rede Eleitoral gave up its observation efforts in Hula due to lack of funding, and only 2 provinces have funds set aside specifically for observation. Both groups have expressed grave concerns over their ability to provide oversight and supervision of the registration process as the government expands the number of registration brigades. Opposition parties have announced plans to combine resources to supervise the registration process in all locations, but funding for civil society observers remains a concern.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: The successful completion of the first phase of voter registration bodes well for the rest of the process and the elections. Given the opposition's overall support of the process and the slow but steady increase in the number of accredited observers, glitches seem to have been growing pains not acts of bad faith. The government also seems to be making a good faith effort to hold as transparent a process as possible. The real test will be how the lessons learned during phase one help mold phase two of registration. CIPE will announce its strategy for phase two in early January and will likely continue increasing the number of registration brigades, focusing in particular on mobile registration brigades for rural areas. END COMMENT.

FERNANDEZ